

BONFIRES OF ST JOHN





“My childhood brings me memories of Alicante’s land...

*...of gunpowder, gunpowder, gunpowder transformed into lightning,
of bright fireworks, cascades of light, a Gorgon’s locks,
sunshine at midnight, prodigious Circe’s works.”*

FERNANDO SÁNCHEZ-DRAGÓ

ORIGINS

- From time immemorial human beings have worshipped fire, and there are abundant examples of pagan festivities based on the purification of fire, with water also sometimes playing an important role.

[*Lighting bonfires at the beginning of summer has much to do with the adoration of the sun.*] The word solstice comes from Latin meaning 'the sun stands still'. During the summer solstice (21-22 June) the sun stands at its highest point in the ecliptic over the Tropic of Cancer, making the longest day of the year. This is when fires and bonfires are made, transmitting the force of fire to give an idea of the power we derive from the sun.






Christianity assimilated the custom of burning bonfires in honour of St John's feast day (24 June). This was a deeply-rooted custom throughout the Land of Valencia, as fire and water were the major ingredients combined in many of the local festivities.

In former times, people from Alicante would go on a procession out into the surrounding countryside close to the beach and have a picnic supper on 23 June, with no lack of the typical 'coca en tonyina', a pizza-like base topped with tuna, onion and pine kernels. At midnight, *they would light bonfires, dance around them and set off firecrackers, only to wind up swimming in the sea in the early hours of the morning.*

This custom was preserved when the festivity of the Bonfires of St John were formerly constituted in Alicante by means of a petition presented to the City Council on 29 March 1928. The introduction mentioned that "...there is a festivity which is deeply rooted in popular tradition, based on an ancient custom..."





Fiestas | **OF FIRE**

■ In its institutionalised form, the '*hoguera*' (*foguera* in Valencian) refers indiscriminately to the 'bonfire' itself or to the artistic construction which is set alight during this festivity, usually a large group of figurines or effigies made in wood, papier-mâché and even cloth with straw fillings. Bonfire festivities are popular in towns around the Land of Valencia. But practically all of these towns are located in the province of Alicante, except for the town of Nules in the province of Castellón, and a few others. The Bonfire festivities are similar to their sister festivities of Las Fallas held in Valencia province and elsewhere since the beginning of the 20th century.

Benidorm, San Juan de Alicante, Torrevieja and Jávea currently have their own bonfire festivities. The village of San Vicente del Raspeig celebrates them in July, but other municipalities such as Dénia, Pego and Elda organise Fallas instead of Bonfires.



“The special Alicante green and gold

ornately tinge the intoxicating blue

you can feel in the city of the bonfires.”

RAMÓN GÓMEZ DE LA SERNA



THE BONFIRES OF ST JOHN

in Alicante

■ A Cadiz-born Post Office employee called José María Py y Ramírez settling first in Cartagena but later living in Valencia for some time, where he actively participated in various Fallas festivities, was appointed to Alicante where his father worked as a notary public.

| In 1928 he played a major role in the formal organisation of the so-called 'Fogueres de Sant Joan'

(Bonfires of St John). For the first festivity, nine city districts took part, later increasing to 17 the next year, when the Bonfire Festival Hymn was premiered. Today, at the start of a new millennium, over one hundred bonfires are lit during Alicante's biggest festivity.

The Bonfire festivity became consolidated very quickly, and since 1932 the festival commission elects a Festival Queen, or '*Bellea del Foc*' (Fire Beauty) with her court of honour comprising six ladies in waiting.





The Bonfires of St John have achieved their own peculiar character, giving rise to a personality of their own in comparison to similar festivals.

In these festivities local Alicanteans and their guests and visitors actively take part in the mirth [*living the festivity in the streets, with lots of pageantry out of doors.*]

Temporary festival halls called 'barracas' have been set up in the streets since 1931, and it is here that the feasters share lunches and dinners in the open, and dance to the music during their nightly parties.



As regards artistry, [*'hoguera' designs often reject traditional baroque styles in search of more avant-garde lines, even experimenting with innovative techniques.*] The construction includes a series of satirical 'ninots', or colourful figurines in papier-mâché often criticising local situations and celebrities and sometimes reaching out to comment on the national or international scene.

The lead-up to the festivities takes place in the month of May, when the Fire Beauty is elected by a jury and by the presidents of all the bonfire commissions. At the beginning of June the busy official ceremonies programme kicks off with the so-called 'Ninot Exhibition', which includes all the figurines that citizens have voted to save from the flames each year – an honour reserved for only one 'ninot' from an adult bonfire and another from a children's bonfire.

After this comes the 'proclamation' of the festivities announced from the balconies of the City Hall by a popular celebrity, and the 'Ninot Parade' held just before the busy week of the bonfires in June.



“Well does Alicante, the shimmering city, to feed the sacred flames of its bonfires.”

SERAFÍN AND JOAQUÍN ÁLVAREZ QUINTERO

PLANTÁ OF THE BONFIRES AND BARRACAS



The assembly, or *'plantá'*, of the bonfire constructions takes place on the evening of 20 June. By this time, each bonfire and *'barraca'* commission is busy finishing off their respective monuments, and placing the finishing touches on their meeting halls, so that everything will be ready the next morning for the visit of the officials, who will decide on the prizes to be given in each of the many categories. The midnight labours of the so-called *'foguerers'* and *'barraquers'* in every district of the city are traditionally accompanied by meals including the typical pizza-like *'coca en tonyina'*, and *'bacoques'*, or tasty green figs, all washed down by hearty wine from the province, or substituted in times of heat by a refreshing *'paloma'*, a dry anisette liqueur combined with very cold water.

MASCLETÁS

'Mascletás' are the sound fireworks set off just before the usual lunchtime in this part of the world, at 2 pm, in the circular Plaza de los Luceros, taking place every day from 20 to 24 June. Instead of a display of pretty lights, reserved for the night time, the daytime fireworks emphasise noise – ranging from cracks and pops to thunderous, earthshaking explosions, much to the delight of onlookers, who come for the sheer excitement of listening to and feeling the pounding rhythms of this sound fireworks display.



PARADES

The streets are lined with wooden chairs for people to sit on as all the official bonfire commissions march past during the morning hours. The commission shows off its Fire Beauty, and her court of honour, to the sound of marching bands and [*often the typical music of the region, played on 'dulzainas' (the ancestor of the oboe) and 'tamboriles' (small drums).*] This is usually announced by strings of firecrackers set off as they march along.



Held on the afternoon of 21 June is the so-called 'Entrance of the Bands', during which all the members of each commission parade through the streets with their Fire Beauties and courts of honour, dressed in their finest Alicante bridal gowns, to the sound of musical bands, and accompanied by not a few members wearing typical farmer and farmer's wife costumes in an interesting show of ancestral clothing.

The International Folklore Parade held on the evening of 23 June is also highly attractive because it includes dance groups and examples of folklore and festivities from different places in Spain and the world, with displays of typical dances, colourful costumes and spectacular floats.





FLOWER OFFERING

This is an emotion-packed celebration occurring on the afternoon of 22 June during which flowers are brought to the patron saint and perpetual mayoress of the city, Our Lady of the Remedy (*Virgen del Remedio*). This is the oldest official flower offering held in Spain.

Each bonfire district competes to make the most original and spectacular flower offering, with the Fire Beauty and her court of honour carrying the bouquets of flowers and depositing them before the image of the Virgin on the façade of the City Hall to create an immense tapestry of flowers.





*“’Tis not strange
to see this land
lighted up bright
on St John’s night.
And the bonfires
with their fiery tongues
looking skyward so far
to capture a lucky star.
Showing just for a day,
if only once a year,
the starry beautiful light
of the Levante night.”*

ALBERTO CORTEZ



CREMÁ

The 'cremá', or burning, is the big day of the festival, held on 24 June, the feast night of St John the Baptist, a farewell ceremony. At midnight from the top of Mount Benacantil, commanded by the imposing Santa Barbara Castle, a monumental display of white fireworks looking like a palm tree signals the beginning of the 'cremá', and hundreds of adult bonfires and children's bonfires surrounding their respective 'barracas' are set to the torch.

Alicante will be amass in flames, and people will dance and sing, or perhaps shed a tear.

Around the official bonfire installed in the Plaza del Ayuntamiento, hundreds of young people will defy the heat of the flames with the help of the local firemen, who douse them with water, producing what is known as the typical 'banyá' or 'bath'. Meanwhile the gentle sea breeze will cool the city, as poetically described in the official Bonfire Hymn in the Valencian vernacular: 'A la llum de les fogueres, s'abaniquen les palmeres' (In the light of the bonfires, the palm trees wave).



FIREWORK DISPLAYS

On 25 June the city slowly gets back to normal, looking like nothing has happened the night before, despite all the flames. But in fact the fiesta continues. People find new strength to go on, with new attractions in the town: along the narrow streets and tiny plazas of the old town quarter, a medieval marketplace is set up to sell decorative objects, fashion jewellery and typical food and drink from the region, offering puppet shows and traditional music. At night, as of twelve o'clock, there are fireworks displays, continuing up to 29 June, the feast day of St Peter, when the bonfire action finishes for the year. [***People flock to the Postiguets beach to stand beside the sea and watch the beautiful fireworks competitions staged by renowned national and foreign pyrotechnic companies.***] Following these displays, bright hundred-metre-long strings of firecrackers are set off along the nearby Gómiz promenade.



AN ALL-OUT FIESTA

Days and nights dedicated to festivities, fun and excitement, including religious ceremonies, sports competitions, musical performances, and bullfights in which leading bullfighters take part on foot and on horseback.

Each district vies with the others to publish the best Fiesta Book ('*llibrets*') including articles about Alicante, reports on the Fire Beauties and their courts of honour, profusely illustrated with drawings or sketches of each commission's bonfire constructions. The Official Administrative Commission, as the body responsible for organising these festivities, as well as the City Hall, also publish official magazines on the festivities whose graphic and literary value is highly prized.

[*There are many reasons for coming to see the Bonfires of St John, listed as a Festivity of International Tourist Interest since 1984, exemplifying what is now known in Spain as an all-out or Total Fiesta.*]

Thanks to the efforts of women and men whose altruistic labours are dedicated to giving neighbours, friends and visitors from afar a truly colourful and joyful spectacle, the warm, inviting city of Alicante is able to share with all of its guests, even the most demanding, a festivity that satisfies everyone's urge for entertainment and excitement.





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